

## Deprivation by enigmaticblue

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**Characters:** Eleven (Stranger Things), Joyce Byers, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

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**Summary:**

There are words Eleven never knew the meaning of—until now.

# Deprivation

## Author's Note:

Written for the hc\_bingo prompt “sensory deprivation.”

She thinks of her life in terms of Before and After, even if the After can be measured in days compared to the Before. In the Before, her vocabulary had been as limited as her environment, so many words unnecessary to the moment, to the work, to the pain.

In the Before, Eleven knew that grownups—that *Papa*—brought pain and fear, but After seems to produce a new category of adults. There are still those who cannot be trusted, but the others, like the man in the diner, must be protected.

Eleven wonders if the only good grownup is a dead one—because how else are you to know if they’re dangerous?

In the After, Eleven learns new words, like *friend*, and she learns that touch can bring comfort, not just pain. Mike is clean, warm, soft clothing, protection, and gentle touches. Mike is a cave made out of blankets, a safe space, and darkness without fear.

Mike speaks about his sister, and his parents, but they are people to hide from—either because they are good, and therefore will die if she cannot protect them, or because they are not, and therefore like Papa.

It’s not until she meets Will’s mother than she learns of a third

category.

She doesn't flinch when Will's mother takes her hands, having become more used to physical contact under Mike's coaching, but she's still surprised, even if she doesn't show it.

"Thank you," she says. Eleven isn't used to hearing those words.

Will's mother squeezes her hands tightly, and Eleven remembers that her name is Joyce.

"If it ever gets too scary," Joyce says, "in that place, you just let me know. Okay?"

Eleven has no idea why those words make her want to cry, or why it's hard to swallow when she whispers, "Yes."

She isn't ready to go into the bathtub, to go into that other place, but she knows she must. *Eleven* had brought the monster into this world, *she* had caused Will to be taken; she's the only one who can fix it.

Still, it's different this time. She can feel the pink dress grow wet and heavy as it sticks to her skin, and that's different from Before. In the moments before she lies back in the water, she can hear the others breathing, feel their eyes on her, and it's not the same as when Papa and his men watched her.

Eleven feels their worry like a living thing, and that's different, too. They're worried for Will, yes, and they want her to succeed, but they're worried about *her* as well.

That makes Eleven feel brave, which is another new word. She thinks it means doing something even though she's scared, even though no one is forcing her to do it. There is no Papa ordering her into the tank, no men with rough hands. There is only Will in the Upside Down, and the memory of how Joyce's hands felt squeezing hers, and the knowledge that she's the only one who can do this.

When she finds Will in that dark, cold place, her fear is momentarily eclipsed by a sense of accomplishment, and she falls to her knees next to him. And when Joyce asks her to pass on a message of reassurance, Eleven knows how to reach out, to squeeze his hand, to ask him to hang on just a little longer.

Her scream when he disappears is one of fear—not just for herself, but for him, and for the others who are also losing him—and disappointment.

And disappointment and anger are what she expects when she sits up, water streaming off of her, the goggles popping off to land in the water, but instead she feels warm, thin arms around her.

Even though she's wet, even though she failed, Joyce says over and over, "You're okay, I've got you," while holding her tight.

Eleven now understands what it is to have a mother, and when she cries, it's as much from the deep sense of loss and deprivation that

engenders.

She has never had a mother, and until now, she hadn't known what she was missing.

Mothers, she thinks as she sobs and is held tightly, are a category all their own.